

ACLU Tennessee THE **SPRING 2025** VIGIL

PHOTO BY MALLIKA VOHRA

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

ACLU-TN TEAM MOBILIZES TENNESSEANS

In the face of nonstop attacks on our civil liberties and civil rights by the Trump administration, state legislators and local officials, hundreds of Tennesseans have been mobilizing to fight back. ACLU-TN's new community engagement team hit the ground running this year, actively engaging and empowering communities across our state to build political, community, and electoral power for civil liberties and civil rights in Tennessee. The team builds power through coalition building, voter education and mobilization, volunteer recruitment and advocacy skill development, community organizing, and leadership development.

One recent example of their work was coordinating the **Tennessee Reproductive Freedom Coalition Memphis Day of Action**. Volunteers and partners from across the state came together to be in community and learn about Tennessee bills restricting access to health care and undermining bodily autonomy. Attendees then participated in a training and text bank, contacting over 13,000 voters to encourage them to oppose these bills – ultimately helping stop efforts to criminalize birth control, IVF, and the mailing of abortion medication.

ACLU-TN also joined the **Education For All campaign**, led by the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition, EdTrust-Tennessee, the NAACP of Tennessee, and Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment, to defend undocumented children's access to public education. During this campaign, ACLU-TN lobbied; flooded legislators with emails; contacted 4,000 voters through a phone bank; hosted a Know Your Protest Rights training; and participated in a rally and march at the capitol. The coalition succeeded in stopping legislation that would have allowed public schools to charge undocumented children tuition to attend or deny their enrollment altogether.

Defending civil liberties takes all of us. When you sign up to volunteer with ACLU-TN, you'll get updates on urgent actions, trainings, and ways to support campaigns for free speech, reproductive freedom, LGBTQ+ rights, immigrant justice, and more. Together, we can build a fairer Tennessee—one action at a time.

Sign up to volunteer at <https://tinyurl.com/ACLUTNVol>.

FREE SPEECH & CENSORSHIP

BANNING BOOKS? NOT ON OUR WATCH.

Across the country, we've seen a wave of book bans targeting stories by and about LGBTQ+ people and communities of color — and Tennessee is among them. **Rutherford County Schools recently removed over 145 books from school libraries**, particularly targeting books that discuss LGBTQ+ rights, race and racism.

On April 16, 2025, we filed a lawsuit, along with attorney Kerry Knox, on behalf of three anonymous Rutherford County families and PEN America. PEN America, a national organization that champions the freedom to write, joined on behalf of its author members, 32 of whom had books banned or restricted by the Rutherford County school board.

The First Amendment protects students' rights to access information and ideas, as well as authors' ability to communicate their ideas to students free from undue government interference and viewpoint discrimination.

This kind of targeted censorship also sends a harmful message that some voices don't belong in our classrooms. Our lawsuit asks the court to stop Rutherford County from continuing to ban books from school libraries, and to reinstate many of the materials already banned or restricted. The case is currently pending in federal court, where we'll keep fighting to ensure that our schools are places where all young people feel seen, valued, and free to explore the world through literature.

If you are interested in volunteering with our ongoing campaign to stop book banning in Rutherford County, please sign up at: <https://tinyurl.com/ACLUTNVol>.

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY:

THE 2025 TENNESSEE LEGISLATIVE SESSION

The first legislative session of the 114th Tennessee General Assembly was held from January 14, 2025 through April 22, 2025, making it one of the quickest and most intense sessions in recent memory. Tennessee legislators introduced many dangerous bills designed to further marginalize diverse communities around our state, including attacks on immigrant rights and LGBTQ+ equality. Despite these difficult circumstances, we are proud to have achieved wins on several of our priority issues impacting civil rights and civil liberties in Tennessee.

THE SPECIAL SESSION VOUCHERS AND TRUMP'S IMMIGRATION AGENDA

At the start of the year, Governor Lee announced he would convene a special session to address three key topics: private school vouchers, disaster relief, and immigration policy. The governor has broad authority to call for a special session at any time to address unique or especially significant issues. This year, Governor Lee explained that the matters at hand required imminent action and would be taken up beginning in late January. But in reality, because of its faster procedures, the special session allows the governor and legislators to push through bills that might have received significant opposition during the normal committee process.

The first two issues debated at the special session were education and disaster relief. For Governor Lee, the passage of his statewide, **universal school voucher program** was a top goal for his second term in office, and he finally achieved it this year. Despite broad bipartisan opposition, the school voucher bill (SB 6001/HB 6004) narrowly passed through the legislature. Because of this law, Tennessee taxpayer dollars will be used to pay tuition for private religious schools that are not bound by federal anti-discrimination laws, weakening our state's public school system and harming marginalized students.

The final topic at issue during the special session was immigration. With backing from the Trump administration and Governor Lee, the General Assembly passed a comprehensive immigration bill (SB 6002/HB 6001) to **increase the state's role in carrying out the Trump administration's harmful anti-immigrant agenda**. SB 6002/HB 6001 creates a dedicated immigration enforcement division within the Tennessee Department of Safety, and offers incentives and funding sources for local governments and law enforcement to enter and carry out agreements with federal immigration officials, including through the 287(g) program. Most troublingly, the bill also **creates a new felony offense for local elected officials who vote in favor of "sanctuary policies,"** which are vaguely defined in state law to include any policy that may restrict compliance with federal immigration laws or collaboration with federal immigration authorities. The criminalization of an elected official based solely on the content of their vote is a flagrant violation of free speech protections embedded in both the state and U.S. Constitution and ACLU-TN is preparing litigation to challenge this unconstitutional legislation.

THE REGULAR SESSION

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY RECAP

In February, with the mayhem of the special session behind them, Tennessee legislators returned to business as usual. For us at ACLU-TN, this meant that we were back to playing defense against attacks on civil rights and civil liberties, while also supporting legislative efforts to preserve access to contraception, expand voting rights and strengthen our democracy. While we were unable to stop every problematic bill this year, we are proud that our advocacy contributed to wins on many issues.

[For a full review of our legislative advocacy this year, please see our legislative wrap-up at <https://tinyurl.com/TNLeg25>].

THE REGULAR SESSION

STOPPING ATTACKS ON IMMIGRANTS AND LGBTQ+ PEOPLE, AND A WIN FOR REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Thanks to help from our supporters, we also successfully defeated several other harmful attacks on immigrants and the LGBTQ+ community while expanding access to vital reproductive healthcare. Our efforts played a role in stopping the passage of bills that would have **prevented undocumented people from sending remittances** (SB 268/HB 145) and subjected them to **criminal prosecution simply for residing in Tennessee** (SB 1087/HB 177). We also helped halt bills that would have added **invasive reporting requirements for gender-affirming care** (SB 676/HB 754) and **restricted drag and pride events** (SB 1424/HB 884). Despite vocal opposition from a few extremist, anti-birth control legislators, the Fertility Care and Contraceptive Protection Act (SB 449/HB 533) passed with bipartisan support, **ensuring that fertility treatment and contraceptives remain legal and accessible** in Tennessee.



THE REGULAR SESSION

VOTING RIGHTS RESTORATION

Our proactive legislative goals this year were centered around **voting rights restoration**. Tennessee strips the right to vote from anyone with a felony conviction and has one of the highest disenfranchisement rates in the country, with over 475,000 Tennesseans currently unable to vote due to a prior felony conviction. This state-sanctioned disenfranchisement disproportionately affects communities of color, as over one in five Black men in our state have lost the right to vote. Tennessee has one of the most complicated voting rights restoration processes in the nation for those who have completed their sentence, and ACLU-TN has long supported efforts to reform and simplify this process. SB 407/HB 445 made significant changes to the voting rights restoration process, including removing the requirement that gun rights must also be restored before Tennesseans can receive their voting rights back. Although the separation of guns rights from voting rights is a much-needed change, unfortunately, this legislation codifies voting rights restoration as a judicial process in the court system, thus requiring petition-filing costs and potential attorney fees.

Related legislation to eliminate court costs from the list of legal financial obligations required for voting rights restoration and to grant restoration eligibility for those who have been compliant with child support orders for 12 months passed the Senate and will be heard next year in the House (SB 336/ HB 687). Tennessee remains the only state in the nation to tie child support payments to voting rights restoration, and ACLU-TN will continue to advocate for the elimination of all financial barriers to exercising the right to vote.

With 2025 now behind us, we are beginning to plan for what is coming in 2026. Any bills that are still in committee or which have not been calendared yet can be picked up when the legislators return in January. Civil liberties remain under threat in Tennessee, and we are so grateful to our supporters for helping us continue to defend their rights and liberties at the general assembly.



WANT TO JOIN US?



To keep yourself updated on “Know Your Rights” information, volunteer opportunities, and policy updates, scan the QR code above or visit:

<https://action.aclu.org/signup/tn-email-updates>

WELCOME NEW STAFF

At the ACLU of Tennessee we have **16** passionate staff members working to advance and defend civil rights and liberties daily — fighting for reproductive justice, safeguarding free speech, protecting the rights that empower our communities, and so much more.

ZEE SCOUT (she/her) STAFF ATTORNEY

We are proud to welcome Zee Scout as ACLU-TN's new staff attorney. Zee joins our team with a solid background in movement lawyering and impact litigation, having most

recently served as a Bertha Justice Fellow at the Center for Constitutional Rights. There, she worked on critical cases like *Diamond v. Ward*, which challenged the treatment of an incarcerated trans woman and prison activist; helped lead *Women in Struggle v. Bain*, a First Amendment challenge to Florida's discriminatory bathroom ban law; and assisted in protester defense, public records matters, and a novel challenge to slavery and involuntary servitude in Alabama's state prison system.

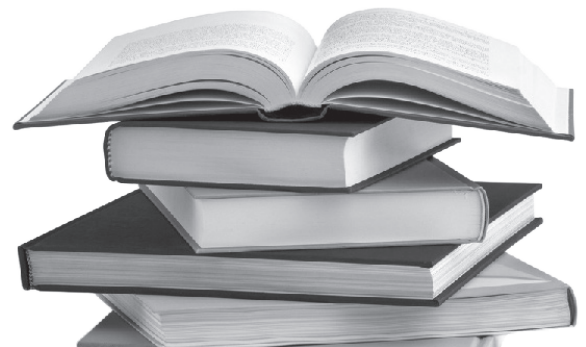
A graduate of the University of Tennessee College of Law, Zee was actively involved in the UT Legal Clinic, the Legal Aid of Middle Tennessee Low-Income Taxpayer Clinic, and deportation defense. Before entering the legal field, she worked as an investigative journalist and focused on court systems and incarceration — experience that continues to shape her fierce advocacy for justice and equity. With Zee on board, we're strengthening our fight to protect civil liberties and advance justice for all Tennesseans.

THE REGULAR SESSION

PROTECTING THE FREEDOM TO LEARN

Perhaps the most high-profile bill of 2025 was SB 893/HB 793, which would have allowed **public schools to charge tuition or refuse enrollment to undocumented schoolchildren**. From the outset, the bill sponsors have been clear that they seek to overturn the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in the 1982 case of *Plyler v. Doe*. That case established the right to education for all schoolchildren regardless of immigration status. In coalition with community partners across the state in the Education for All campaign, a months-long effort to lobby against this bill culminated with the bill failing to advance through the House Finance, Ways, and Means Committee. While it is extremely likely that the bill will return next year, stopping it here is a significant victory that ensures that students remain welcome in Tennessee public schools irrespective of their immigration status.

Unfortunately, the attacks on civil liberties in our schools did not stop with the effort to overturn *Plyler*. Legislators introduced bills that would have **banned pride flags** (SB 266/HB 304), **mandated the display of the Ten Commandments** (SB 303/HB 47), and **allowed public schools to employ volunteer religious chaplains** to provide on-site services to students, teachers and staff (SB 1041/HB 1250). All three bills were blatant violations of students' First Amendment rights, and our advocacy, in coordination with partner organizations across the state, helped ensure that none of these advanced this year.





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HELP POWER THE FIGHT FOR JUSTICE IN TENNESSEE

The fight for civil liberties in Tennessee is growing stronger every day — thanks to supporters like you. We receive no government funding and never charge for our services. Every lawsuit we file, every community we mobilize, and every right we defend is made possible by people who believe in freedom and justice.

Your support fuels our work in the courts, in communities, and at the Capitol. Make a tax-deductible gift to the ACLU Foundation of Tennessee to support our legal and public education efforts, or become a member to help fund our advocacy and lobbying work.

- Donate online at aclu-tn.org/donate
- Mail a check to: **ACLU Foundation of Tennessee**, P.O. Box 120160, Nashville, TN 37212
- Questions? Contact **Mary Hedahl** at mhedahl@aclu-tn.org or **615-320-7142** (press 5)

Together, we can protect freedom and advance justice — for all.



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